

## Digitising Devotion: Mapping the Network of Vernacular Prayer Books in the Late Medieval Low Countries

Prayer books were by far the most commonly read books in the late medieval Low Countries, and, undoubtedly, the most popular prayer books were those based on Geert Grote's translation of the *Book of Hours* into the vernacular. Grote's translation has had a profound impact on devotional culture in the Middle Ages, and has survived in ca. 850 manuscripts and ca. 30 printed editions (until 1540). Despite this clear proliferation in the number of books, the scope and the abundance of vernacular prayer books has scarcely been investigated by scholars focusing on Middle Dutch literature, and almost never from an integrative or holistic perspective that looks past the traditional divide between manuscripts and printed books. The ERC-funded project *Pages of Prayer* is currently carrying out the first large-scale investigation of this unique corpus of texts.<sup>1</sup> It investigates the full ecosystem of Dutch-language prayer books by studying all of their aspects in their mutual interdependence. More specifically, the project charts the interconnections between manuscripts, printed books, texts, images, producers, owners, patrons, places and devotions over a period ranging from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Some information is available about Middle Dutch prayer books already, but it is scattered across several databases, catalogues and inventories. For their catalogue of Middle Dutch manuscripts held at the Royal Library in Brussels, for example, Jan Deschamps and Herman Mulder have identified and described over 300 prayer texts.<sup>2</sup> Their inventory was clearly informed by the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta (BNM)*, which was set up at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Flemish philologist and palaeographer Willem De Vreese (1869-1938). The BNM was converted into a database in the 1990s, and, after 2013, the BNM was expanded into the BNM-I, with financial support of CLARIAH-NL and the Huygens Institute.<sup>3</sup> The BNM-I database focuses principally on texts, but it also contains data on production and ownership. Relevant information about printed books can be found in large online bibliographies such as the ISTC (*Incunabula Short Title Catalogue*), the STCN (*Short Title Catalogue Netherlands*) and the GW (*Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke*). To be able to conduct a longitudinal analysis of Middle Dutch prayer texts transmitted via different kinds of media, it is of crucial importance to connect and to integrate the information scattered across these siloed resources. The *Pages of Prayer* project aggregates the existing descriptions of prayer books, and harmonises and enriches the information as much as possible, with the aim of securing a more panoramic perspective.

The first phase of the project primarily focused on the development of a conceptual data model that can be used to describe the ecosystem of prayer books. The conceptual model that was constructed enables researchers to describe the texts

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/prayer>

<sup>2</sup> J. Deschamps and H. Mulder, *Inventaris van de Middelnederlandse handschriften van de Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België*, 15 vols.

<sup>3</sup> <https://bnm-i.huygens.knaw.nl/>

that have been selected in a specific prayer book, as well as the order in which these texts are presented. It also represents the codicological characteristics of the books themselves, the images disseminated alongside the texts, the devotions connected to the texts, the producers, buyers and readers of the books and the centres, groups and communities these persons participated in. The model aimed to represent aspects that are relevant both for traditional book historical analyses and for computational research. After the modelling phase, the conceptual data model was implemented in *Heurist*, an online database management system developed specifically for exploring multimodal relational structures.<sup>4</sup> The system offers a range of standard record types that can easily be customised, and it also offers support for the use of standardised vocabularies. The interoperability of the PRAYER data can be increased further through the addition of existing persistent identifiers. Decorations, for example, are described using ICONCLASS codes, and authors, translators and illustrators are identified using persistent identifiers found in VIAF or WikiData, whenever possible. The books themselves are identified via unique shelfmarks assigned by the institutions which hold the books. Measures such as these ultimately increase the flexibility for integration with other data sets.

This paper discusses some of the critical decisions that were taken during the development of the conceptual data model, and outlines some of the caveats that need to be born in mind while modelling authorship, production processes and historical locations. In addition, the paper presents some tentative results of the project based on provisional network visualisations. This first set of graphs aims to give an impression of the ways in which the data from the *PRAYER* database can be used to study the production manuscripts and printed books, the poetics of prayer, the function of images and patterns of ownership. While the *PRAYER* project primarily aims to explain the expansion and unequalled popularity of prayer books in the late medieval Low Countries, its data model and methodology can provide inspiration for other projects working with large numbers of texts transmitted jointly in various compositions.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://heurist.huma-num.fr/>